

Understanding the British School System

EDUCATING YOUR CHILDREN

As a member of the U.S. visiting forces or as civilian employee of the Department of Defense, you are entitled to use the British state school system, free of charge. The vast majority of American families have a very positive experience in the British educational system, but you should be aware that there are some significant differences between the UK and US school systems. For instance, children are placed according to their age group and not tested for placement by skill level or previous years of completed education.

THE BRITISH SCHOOL SYSTEM

Schooling is compulsory in England for all children between 5 and 16 years of age. Children enter school the September after their fourth birthday. Many children from age 2 ½ to four years of age attend pre-school. There is no curriculum at this level, although there is a set of desirable learning objectives. Some pre-schools offer a limited number of free sessions while others are fee-based. For more information on pre-school choices in the local area, speak to your School Liaison Officer or Community Relations Adviser.

The School year:

The school year runs from September to July and is divided into three terms (semesters). The autumn term (Fall) runs from September to Christmas, the Spring term runs from January to Easter and the Summer term runs from April to July. Each term lasts approximately 12 weeks, and a half term holiday is given in the middle of each term, usually a weeks' duration. Half term holidays are usually held in October, February and May. The Christmas and Easter holidays are usually two weeks and the summer holiday is around 6 weeks long.

Primary schools:

Primary schools are for children aged 4 to 11 years. This may also be referred to as Key Stage 1 (ages 4 to 7) and Key Stage 2 (ages 7 to 11). The first class in primary school is usually called the Reception class, and each child automatically moves to the next higher class at the end of the school year.

The subjects to be taught at primary schools are specified by the National Curriculum, which also sets out Standard Attainment Targets (SAT's) to be reached. Pupils are tested on SAT's at 7 and 11 years old, at the end of Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2, in the compulsory core subjects of English, Mathematics and Science. Other subjects, including History, Geography, Technology, Music, Art and Physical Education (PE) are also taught. Details of these are found in the individual school prospectuses. For younger children, the subjects are often integrated into topics.

Secondary schools:

Between the ages of 11 and 16, children attend Secondary school, usually comprehensive schools where all abilities are taught. State secondary schools must follow the National Curriculum and assessment of the children takes place at Key Stage 3 (age 14) and Key Stage 4 (age 16). The General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) is the principal means of assessment for 16 year olds. Many subjects include course work in addition to examinations in each individual subject.

Many pupils remain at school after the minimum leaving age of 16. Education for 16 to 18 year olds is usually referred to as Sixth Form, with the Lower Sixth and Upper Sixth.

In the Lower Sixth, students study for AS level exams, usually in 3 or 4 subjects, leading on to A level exams (Advanced Level) usually in 3 subjects in the Upper Sixth.

The usual route to university and college is through the A level system, depending on the grades attained in these examinations.

| | US Equivalent | Key Stage | School Year | Age of child | Testing |
|------------------|---------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|-------------------|
| PRIMARY | pre-K | 1 | Reception | 4-5 years | |
| | K | 1 | Year 1 | 5-6 years | |
| | 1 | 1 | Year 2 | 6-7 years | Key Stage 1 SAT's |
| | 2 | 2 | Year 3 | 7-8 years | |
| | 3 | 2 | Year 4 | 8-9 years | |
| | 4 | 2 | Year 5 | 9-10 years | |
| | 5 | 2 | Year 6 | 10-11 years | Key Stage 2 SAT's |
| SECONDARY | 6 | 3 | Year 7 | 11-12 years | |
| | 7 | 3 | Year 8 | 12-13 years | |
| | 8 | 3 | Year 9 | 13-14 years | Key Stage 3 SAT's |
| | 9 | 4 | Year 10 | 14-15 years | |
| | 10 | 4 | Year 11 | 15-16 years | GCSE's |
| SIXTH | 11 | Lower Sixth | Year 12 | 16-17 years | AS level |
| FORM | 12 | Upper Sixth | Year 13 | 17-18 years | A level |

Private / Independent Schools:

Private or Independent schools are schools that are privately maintained by fees paid by parents. Confusingly in Britain these private schools are sometimes known as "public schools". Often these schools offer boarding facilities for students as well as day school. This means that the school day is longer, and often includes Saturday school particularly for sports, but the school holidays are longer. These independent schools do not have to follow the National Curriculum and Standard

Attainment Targets although most will follow the GCSE curriculum as this is a nationally recognized set of qualifications.

PRIMARY SCHOOL EDUCATION

Children attend primary school between the ages of 4 to 11 years. At this stage, a broad range of subjects are taught to all children, and there are often after school clubs which extend the curriculum further such as specialist sports, music and languages.

The School day:

The school day is usually from around 8:45am to 3:00pm, with a lunch break around 12:00; each individual school sets its own times. Some schools provide a hot lunch, while others expect the children to bring a “packed lunch”. Morning sessions are divided by a short break or “playtime” when the children are expected to play outside, except in very bad weather. Young children will also have a break during the afternoon session.

All schools are required to give religious education, but any child may be withdrawn from religious activities at their parents’ request.

School uniform:

Many British schools have a uniform that all children are required to wear. This usually comprises a grey skirt or trousers (pants), shirt, sweater or sweatshirt and perhaps a blazer and school tie, although this is becoming less common. Different schools have their own school colors, and you can buy items of school uniform directly from the school. Many national retailers also stock the most common items.

Schools usually also require a uniform for Physical Education (PE), often shorts with a PE T-shirt, and black trainers (tennis shoes/sneakers).

School Reports:

At primary school age, school reports to parents are usually written once a year, and there are Parents Evenings held to discuss progress, usually once per term or three times per year. The report will focus on the progress of your child, but grades are not always given, either as an overall attainment standard or on individual pieces of school work.

The school will administer SAT tests at the end of Key Stage 1 (age 7) and Key Stage 2 (age 11). The school is required to submit their SAT’s testing results to the Department of Education, who produce national league tables of schools once per year. These are published in the newspapers and are available from the County Council or the Department of Education. This means you can compare the results of one school versus another.

You may not receive as much information about your child’s progress as you may be used to or expect. As a general rule in respect of a child’s progress, “No news is good news”. Report cards are only issued once per year in British primary schools, and information about grading is infrequent.

If you, as a parent, have concerns about any aspect of school life, you should first speak to the class teacher, then send a note to the Head Teacher asking a specific question, and an appointment to discuss the issue. Often individual class teachers also have a “home book” for each child, where comments and concerns can be written by both the parents and teacher.

SECONDARY SCHOOL EDUCATION

Children attend secondary school between the ages of 11 and 16 years. Many students will choose to stay at school for a further two years after this. At the beginning of secondary school, students study a wide variety of subjects, but one of the main differences between the British and American school systems is that the British students specialize in their chosen subjects much earlier.

American students will probably find that their education is more broad based but less specialized than their British counterparts from age 15 onwards. Most local schools welcome our American students to stay through age 18, but this may depend on their progress in school.

Up to the end of Key Stage 3 (age 14), all students follow the same curriculum, which includes English, Mathematics, Science (Physics, Chemistry and Biology), History, Geography, Languages, ICT (Information and Computer Technology), Religious Education, Physical Education, Music, Drama, Art, Design & Technology (covering such topics as woodwork, metalwork, cookery, textiles etc.) and PHSE (Personal, Social and Health Education).

Choosing Subject options

Towards the end of Year 9 (age 13-14), all students select usually around 10 subjects to study in more detail, and **drop all other subjects**. Some of these subjects are compulsory, such as English, Mathematics and Science, and others are selected by the student. These subjects are studied for the next two years (years 10 and 11), culminating in the GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) exams at the end of Year 11. All GCSE subjects are a two year course, and many of them involve course work throughout the two years as well as written exams at the end of the two years. As well as the traditional subjects studied to date, students may also be able to choose other GCSE subject options such as Engineering or Business Studies.

American students arriving part way through the two year GCSE course will find it difficult to assimilate, as they will have missed some of the course content which will be included in the final examinations. They may also have missed some coursework which makes up part of the final grade, and modular examinations which can take place throughout the two years.

At the end of Year 11, after GCSE's, students may leave school if they wish, or move on to a technical or training college. However the more academic students usually opt to go on to Sixth Form, where they specialize further. Students usually study up to 5 subjects (in great detail) in the first year of Sixth form, specializing usually in 3 subjects in the second year of Sixth form. These three subjects are studied to an advanced level, and British students would be ahead of their American counterparts in these subjects only, while having a much narrower based education in other general subjects.

At the end of the Sixth Form, students leave school but can move on to the University system. Most university courses are 3 or 4 years in duration, and students will specialize in usually one subject only. There is not a general education year at the beginning of a university course, and students will only attend lectures in their chosen course subject(s).

Keeping informed of your child's progress

At secondary school age, you will usually receive one school report per term (three per year) detailing your child's progress. In addition, you will be invited to attend Parent's Evenings where you can discuss your child's progress with individual subject teachers.

Many secondary schools operate a Tutor (Homeroom) system. When your child starts at school, they will be placed into a Tutor Group, with a Form Tutor (Homeroom Teacher). The Form Tutor will move up the school along with all the students in his/her group. This means that the Form Tutors get to know each student very well, and is the first point of contact in the event of any problems.

GENERAL INFORMATION ABOUT BRITISH SCHOOLS

School Management:

The Head Teacher has responsibility for the school. However, at a state school, he or she is assisted by a governing body, which is made up of parents, teachers and representatives from the local community. The school governors have direct responsibility for finance, curriculum, buildings and grounds, health & safety, special needs and a variety of other areas. Governors are usually elected and serve for four years. Their names and addresses are posted at the school as well as in the Annual Report to Parents, and they are there to support the school, the staff, children and parents. Ask for a copy of the latest Annual Report as it will give a good overview of the standing and progress of the school.

Transport to School:

Transport to and from school is **not provided automatically by the state**, and it is your responsibility to get your child to and from school, although there is often a school bus service, especially for secondary school students. See the School Liaison Officer or individual schools for more information about transportation.

Getting a Place at a British School:

Members of the US Visiting Forces are entitled to use the British state school system free of charge. Under this system, the Local Education Authority (LEA) is obliged to find a school place for anyone living in their county.

You are able to choose any school for your child, and you do not need to send them to the nearest school. This means that you can send your child to a well-performing school some distance away, even if you are not living in the catchment area.

However, the schools with a good reputation often get filled up quickly, and each school has a maximum number of students that it is able to accept. Schools also have a number of criteria for how it selects its students, and these will usually be based on proximity to the schools, siblings at the school and any special educational needs. Once a year group is full, the school should not accept additional students into that year group. It is possible therefore that those families with more than one child may be able to get a place at their local school for one child, but not all. If your first choice school is full in some or all year groups, the Local Education Authority is obliged to find a school place elsewhere. However, the school allocated may not be the nearest school to your home address, and may be some distance away.

Primary School: It is usually easiest to register your child for primary school by visiting the school direct, and asking for a school application form. Your CRA is very happy to arrange for you to tour the local primary schools, which will give you an opportunity to see the school in action, meet the Head Teacher and talk to members of staff. This should give you a good feel for the schools in the local area, and help you to decide which school is best for your child. Although all schools

follow the same curriculum, there are subtle differences in the way in which the schools are run, and extra-curriculum activities offered.

Secondary School: You may be able to register with the school direct, but you may also need to register with the Local Education Authority for a place at a secondary school.

Admission to a British school is usually preceded by an interview with the Head Teacher. The student's previous academic record and birth certificate should be presented at the interview to assist in the school placement. Not all British schools understand the American system of grades so parents should take a portfolio of their child's work, including summaries of each course and how well the child met the course objectives.

The Appeal System:

If you have not been allocated a place at your first choice of school, you are able to make an Appeal using the schools appeal system. You need to complete a form with your family details, and reasons why you think your child should be offered a place at your chosen school, even though the school is full. Once completed, the forms should be sent to the Local Education Authority who will schedule a date for you to put your case before an Appeal panel. The members of the Appeal panel are independent to the school, and will decide whether the school should offer your child a place based on the reasons you have given. The decision of the Appeals panel is final.

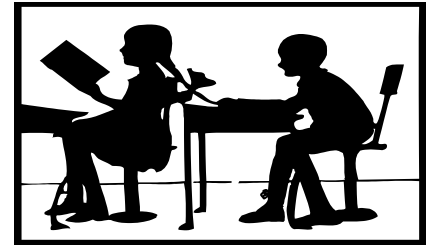
Crossing County Boundaries:

The situation is further complicated at RAF Fairford as the Base is located in two separate counties (Gloucestershire and Wiltshire) with a third county nearby (Oxfordshire). Anyone living on base will come under the Gloucestershire Local Education Authority, while those living in or near Swindon will come under the Wiltshire Education Authority. Although there are schools in Wiltshire that may be nearer to RAF Fairford, families living within Gloucestershire County will only be offered places at Gloucestershire schools. Families living in Swindon will only be offered places at Wiltshire schools. It is possible for a family living in Gloucestershire to specifically choose a school out of the county, but they will only be offered a place if the school is not already full.

Private / Independent Schools:

To get a place at a private school, you should apply direct to the School Admissions Secretary who will provide you with information about the school and the admissions process. Often your child will have to sit an entrance test prior to being accepted at the school, which will assess their current attainment level and help the school to place your child in the right class.

OTHER USEFUL INFORMATION ABOUT BRITISH SCHOOLS:



- Discuss discipline policies with the Head Teacher when you register. Schools have a Behaviour Policy in place and bullying is not tolerated at any age. Corporal punishment is banned from all state maintained schools.
- British schools supply exercise books in which the children write their work. Paper size is different in the UK; it is known as A4 and is longer and narrower than the US 8 ½ x 11.
- When your child is enrolled in a British school, you automatically become a member of the PTA (Parent Teacher Association). This group raises funds to supplement the school budget with events such as table top sales, school fairs, quiz nights and other fund raising activities. Give it your support! It not only benefits the school but also gives you a good opportunity to get to know other parents.
- Generally, parents and Head Teachers all welcome the enrichment of the experience of American children in local schools, and there has been a warm relationship and appreciation of the opportunities that this offers to all involved.
- Note that your children will not have the American holidays, such as the 4th July, Thanksgiving etc. as days off at British schools. You will need to discuss your family requirements with the school, so that your child may be a part of American traditions and holidays when appropriate.
- British schools will not cover American history as a separate course, although some aspects of American history may be covered in other courses.
- A recent law in Britain prevents anyone from videotaping any children during school performances, although you may be allowed to take photographs. Check with the Head Teacher on the policy for their school.
- Check with the school on their policy for bringing snacks to school. Most schools only allow fruit, not sweets or candy.
- **Please give as much notice as possible when taking your children out of school. As soon as you have a PCS date, inform the school – don't just leave. This is very important as it enables the school to plan its acceptance numbers for the next term. You may prevent another child from being able to register if you do not keep the school informed.**
- There are many differences in the everyday language used by British and American children, and it is worth pointing out some differences to your child before they start school, to prevent any embarrassment. Here are some common differences, (and there are many others!):

| | | | |
|------------------------|--------------|---------|--------------|
| PE kit | gym bag | biscuit | cookie |
| crisps | potato chips | sweets | candy |
| fizzy drink | soda | squash | drink |
| sellotape | scotch tape | plaster | band-aid |
| rubber | eraser | chips | french fries |
| Wellingtons or willies | rubber boots | | |

- It is accepted in British Primary schools that Key Stage 1 children of both sexes can change for PE in the same classroom.
- The term *school* in Britain normally refers to establishments which provide education for students between 5 and 18. It is not generally used to describe colleges or universities.
- Schools and nurseries are inspected regularly by OFSTED, and the results are published. These are available on-line so you can find out how well your chosen school is performing.
- Your child will have to make adjustments going into the British education system as well as returning to the American system. As a parent, you will have to take into account changes in curriculum, teaching methods, and social and emotional differences. Hopefully, however, it will be a wonderful experience for your child, and educational in the widest sense of the word.

FURTHER EDUCATION

Further Education covers education for students over the age of 16, and goes beyond what has been achieved in previous compulsory education but which are not at degree level (Higher Education). Typically Further Education includes A-levels, AS levels and certain vocational qualifications.

The largest group of people in further education is those aged between 16 and 19, to whom further education must be available if they want it. But many other people undertake full or part-time further education. Students aged between 16 and 19 can study at school or at a college providing further education. They can often remain at the school they have been attending or may transfer to a different school, for example if their current school doesn't offer the range or combination of courses they wish to study.

There are generally two types of college:

1. Sixth form colleges are similar to schools and a student can transfer to one at the age of 16
2. Colleges of further education usually offer a wider range of courses than sixth form colleges and provide education and training for student aged over 19 as well as for full time 16-19 year olds.

Colleges produce their own prospectuses, providing information on entry requirements and the purpose of courses. These prospectuses may also be available through your child's schools and the local careers service. Some students aged 16 and over may be eligible for financial help through the Learner Support Funds and it is worth asking the school or college about this.

HIGHER EDUCATION / UNIVERSITY

Beyond college and sixth-form, is University. Entry requirements to most degree courses are three A-levels at grade E or above, and many require more qualifications than this.

Applicants apply through a central clearinghouse, the Universities and Colleges Admission Service (UCAS), which all academic institutions offering degrees and higher education courses are members of. Applicants may apply for a maximum of 6 courses or institutions. Applications are completed in the last year of A-Levels and submitted no later than Dec. 15, earlier for some courses and Oxford or Cambridge. Those who get no offers are matched to courses with vacancies.

BEFORE YOU CHOOSE A SCHOOL:

There are many differences in the British and American school systems. If you are thinking about educating your child in the British school system, consider the following points:

- Talk to the SLO or CRA about how the British school system works, as it is very different to what you are used to, especially if you have teenage children. Don't send your child to the school your neighbor has chosen before finding out whether this is the best option for you.
- Don't be afraid to ask for clarification, help and advice from the school.
- Get a copy of all the relevant information to help you make the right decision for you and your child.
- Visit the local schools, meet the Head Teachers and read their prospectuses.
- Think about transport arrangements and ask at the schools - you will be responsible for transporting your child to a local British school, although a limited bus service may be available at some schools.
- Be aware that you will not receive as much information about your child's progress as you may be used to. When you visit the school, ask the Head Teacher about the frequency of written reports and parent-teacher meetings.
- Ask the Head Teacher about what opportunities there will be to talk to your child's teacher, if you have anything to discuss.
- Get involved with your child's school - it will benefit you, your child and the school.

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